

African American Identity History and Racial Terminology

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Introduction

The terms *Black* and *African American* are often used as though they mean exactly the same thing, but the difference can matter. “Black” is a broad racial identity that can include people with family roots in the United States, Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America, Europe, or elsewhere. “African American” is commonly used for Americans of African descent and is especially associated with the historical community shaped by slavery, emancipation, segregation, migration, and the civil-rights struggle in the United States.

Neither term is fixed forever. Language changes as people change the way they describe themselves, and older labels that once appeared in government records or public institutions may now sound outdated or offensive. Academic writing should therefore pay attention to historical context and, where possible, use the terminology preferred by the people being discussed.

Race, Ethnicity, and Identity

Race is a social classification rather than a simple biological division of humanity. The categories used by governments and institutions have changed over time, which is one reason racial terminology can be confusing. Ethnicity is different. It may involve ancestry, nationality, language, religion, culture, or shared history.

A person may therefore identify as Black racially and also identify as Jamaican American, Nigerian American, Haitian American, Somali American, or African American. Some people identify with more than one race as well. A broad racial category can be useful for demographic analysis, but it should not erase important differences in history and culture.

How Racial Terminology Changed

Historical documents use a range of racial terms that would not normally be chosen in current academic prose. During slavery and the nineteenth century, governments and institutions classified people by legal status, perceived ancestry, and color. After emancipation, words such as “colored” and “Negro” remained common in public life and even appeared in the names of organizations created by Black Americans.

Those terms should be preserved when quoting a historical source or official title, but repeating them casually today can distort the period being discussed. During the twentieth century, “Black” gained new political importance through the civil-rights and Black Power movements. “African American” became more prominent later as a term emphasizing African heritage and a distinct American history.

Slavery and Emancipation

African American history cannot be separated from the transatlantic slave trade and the development of hereditary slavery in British North America and the United States. Enslaved Africans and their descendants became central to the economy of many colonies and states while being denied basic freedom and legal rights.

The United States prohibited the legal importation of enslaved people beginning in 1808, but slavery itself continued and the domestic slave trade expanded. During the Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation took effect on January 1, 1863, declaring freedom for enslaved people in areas then in rebellion. Slavery was abolished throughout the country through ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865, subject to the punishment-for-crime exception written into the amendment.

Reconstruction and Segregation

Reconstruction brought major constitutional change. The Fourteenth Amendment established citizenship and equal-protection principles, while the Fifteenth Amendment prohibited denial of the vote on the basis of race, color, or previous condition of servitude. Black men held public office at local, state, and federal levels during this period.

Those gains were met by violent resistance. Jim Crow laws, voter suppression, economic discrimination, and racial terror restricted Black political and social equality for decades. Lynching and other forms of violence were used not only against individuals but as a way of intimidating entire communities.

The Great Migration

During the twentieth century, millions of Black Americans left the South for cities in the North, Midwest, and West. They moved for work, education, political opportunity, and greater personal safety, although racial discrimination was by no means limited to the South.

This Great Migration reshaped cities such as Chicago, Detroit, New York, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles. It also influenced music, literature, politics, religion, labor, and business. The Harlem Renaissance is one of the best-known cultural developments associated with these changes.

The Civil Rights Movement

The modern civil-rights movement challenged segregation, voter suppression, unequal education, and employment discrimination through court cases, boycotts, marches, voter-registration drives, religious organizing, journalism, and direct action.

Important developments included *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The movement included many different strategies and leaders, among them Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, Thurgood Marshall, Malcolm X, John Lewis, and Bayard Rustin.

Black America Is Not One Experience

It is misleading to describe Black Americans as one cultural or political group with identical experiences. Region, religion, income, education, generation, migration history, language, and family background all matter. A family with roots in the rural U.S. South may have a very different history from a recent Ethiopian, Nigerian, Jamaican, or Haitian immigrant family, even if members of both families identify as Black.

At the same time, racial classification can create shared experiences because discrimination may be based on how a person is perceived rather than on exact ancestry. Broad racial identity and more specific ethnic identity can therefore exist together.

Demographic Profile

The U.S. Census Bureau distinguishes between people who identify as Black or African American alone and those who identify as Black in combination with another race. In the 2020 Census, 41.1 million people identified as Black or African American alone, or 12.4% of the U.S. population. When people who identified as Black in combination with another race were included, the total was 46.9 million, or 14.2% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021).

Those figures should not be read as a count of one homogeneous ethnic community. Census data also record detailed identities connected to the Caribbean and sub-Saharan Africa, including Nigerian, Ethiopian, Somali, Jamaican, and Haitian identities.

Migration and Regional Change

The South has long contained a large share of the Black population because of the history of slavery and the communities that developed there. The Great Migration redistributed millions of people

toward northern and western cities, while later decades saw substantial movement toward southern metropolitan areas such as Atlanta, Houston, Dallas, and Charlotte.

Modern population patterns therefore reflect both long-established communities and newer internal and international migration.

Culture and Public Life

African American influence can be seen across literature, music, law, politics, religion, science, medicine, business, sport, film, and visual art. Blues, jazz, gospel, rhythm and blues, soul, funk, rock, and hip-hop all developed through major Black artistic contributions and later shaped global culture.

African American intellectual life has also included long-running debates about integration, nationalism, education, religion, economic development, feminism, migration, and citizenship. Writers and thinkers such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Zora Neale Hurston, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Ralph Ellison, and bell hooks approached these questions from very different perspectives.

Using Racial Terms Carefully

Academic writing about race should be precise rather than anxious. A few practical rules help:

- Use the identity terms preferred by the person or community when known.
- Do not treat race, nationality, and ethnicity as interchangeable.
- Use outdated racial terms only when the historical source or title makes them necessary.
- Explain historical language when it may be unfamiliar or offensive today.
- Support claims about population, health, crime, income, or education with reliable evidence rather than stereotypes.
- Remember that multiracial and multiethnic identities are common.

Conclusion

The history of Black Americans is central to the history of the United States, but the population is far too diverse to be explained by one label or one experience. “Black” can serve as a broad racial identity, while “African American” may be more specific depending on the historical or cultural context.

The most useful approach is to combine accurate history with careful language. Terms should fit the people and period being discussed, and demographic claims should be supported with current evidence rather than inherited assumptions.

References

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